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ABSTRACT

In an exploratory study of peak communication experiences (PCEs), 36 male and 50 female undergraduates from a speech communication course were asked to describe their PCEs using 19 descriptors derived from A. Maslow's model of the generalized peak experience. Two-thirds or more of both sexes used 10 of these 19 descriptors to characterize their PCEs: a sense of the significance, beauty, and value of their communication; loss of awareness of time and place; an experience of spontaneity, and affection for and acceptance of the other person; and a recognition of the other person's uniqueness. Corroborating Maslow's speculation that males and females might not come by their peak experiences in the same ways, a larger percentage of females than males portrayed their PCEs as (1) seeing the other in a richer way, (2) feeling that the experience was almost more than one could bear, (3) resolving opposites, (4) giving acceptance and love, (5) being released from fear, (6) experiencing spontaneity and effortlessness, and (7) feeling playful and creative. The three experiences identified least frequently by both males and females involved the surrender of longstanding cognitive styles: disappearance of self, dropping of labels, and a moving away from a dualistic mindset. (MM)

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GREATEST MOMENTS IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION: PEAK COMMUNICATION EXPERIENCING

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ABSTRACT

Empirical research exploring the phenomenon of "peak communication experiences" is surprisingly absent from the efforts of both communication researchers and peak experience investigators. In this exploratory study, eighty-six respondents were asked to describe their peak communication experiences (PCEs) using nineteen descriptors derived from the Maslow model of the generalized peak experience. Two-thirds or more of both sexes used ten of these nineteen descriptors to characterize their PCEs, thereby providing an overview of the peak communication experience. Significant differences between the sexes were found on seven of the nineteen items, all with females in the greater proportion. These findings are placed within the context of previous relevant sex-difference research.

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"Peak communication experience" is the expression that will be used here to refer to our greatest moments in interpersonal communication--our moments of highest mutual understanding, happiness and fulfillment deriving from the process of communicating with other human beings. Empirical research exploring the phenomenon of peak communication experiences is surprisingly absent. In fact, the study of peak experiences within the context of interpersonal communication is a virtual research poverty-pocket.

Ruesch (1967) once described communication as "the process that links discontinuous parts of the living world to one another." When this "linking" does occur to a substantial extent, when human life significantly comes together with itself through the process of humans communicating, how are these human interactants affected, cognitively and emotionally? What happens within us during our greatest moments in human communication, our peak communication experiences? Since this is a question that human communication theory has not previously addressed, no answer can currently be offered.[1]

Nor have peak experience researchers themselves specifically zeroed-in on human communicating as a catalyst to heightened states of personal and interpersonal functioning. Maslow (1968, p. 71), in his original instructions to his respondents in his pioneering study on peak experiencing, asked his subjects to think of rapturous moments when they had perhaps been in love, or had been suddenly "hit" by music or a book or a painting, or by an acute burst of their own creativity. Maslow then had his

respondents describe such moments in detail, and combined these reports with those emerging from the literatures of mysticism, religion, art, creativity, and love in order to formulate an overall picture of the peak experience. Acts of interpersonal communication were not the explicit focus of Maslow's investigations of the sources and dimensions of peak experiencing.

In a more recent examination of triggers and descriptors of transcendant states of consciousness, Greeley (1974) provided his nearly 1500 respondents with the following options for identifying trigger stimuli: music, prayer, nature, quiet reflection, a church service or a sermon, children, reading the Bible, being alone in church, reading poetry or fiction, childbirth, sexual lovemaking, creative work, appreciating a painting, physical exercise, drugs, and "miscellaneous". As in Maslow's work, acts of spontaneous face-to-face human communication have not been directly probed in this line of investigation.

It is the guiding assumption behind the present study that in addition to arising out of compelling encounters with art and music (Panzarella, 1980), and athletic endeavor (Ravizza, 1977), and nature (Wuthnow, 1978), and religious experience (Hay and Morisy, 1978; Thomas and Cooper, 1978), peak experiences also arise out of mergings with the consciousnesses of fellow human beings through rare but impactful episodes of interpersonal communication. Each of us has tasted of these moments of heightened communicative involvement, and have come away from such engagements somehow enriched and enlarged. It is our task in the

present project to examine peak communication experiences, via the model of the generalized peak experience introduced by Maslow (1968).

The Research Questions

The first research question raised by the present investigation is this: (1) Which characteristics of the Maslow model of the generalized peak experience also serve to describe the peak communication experience?

The second research question relates to the role of gender, a variable not usually pursued in peak experience research: (2) What differences exist between females and males in their peak communication experiencing?

There is reason for anticipating gender differences in peak communication experiencing. Maslow (1964, p. 29) alluded to the likelihood of such differences. Previous communication research has shown that females tend to be more self-disclosing (Cozby, 1973) and emotionally expressive (Cherulnik, 1979) than males. Females also tend to make more eye contact than males (Exline, 1971), are more likely to smile (Mackey, 1976), are more touch-oriented with same-sex persons (Mehrabian, 1971), and stand closer to same-sex dyad partners than males (Heshka and Nelson, 1972). Females tend to be less verbally aggressive (Frodi, Macaulay, and Thome, 1977), more likely to listen (McLaughlin, et al., 1981), and less likely to interrupt than males (Zimmerman and West, 1975). Females have been found to be more empathic (Hoffman, 1977), more nurturance-oriented (Fitzpatrick and

Indvik, 1982), and more accurate at decoding (Isenhart, 1980) and encoding (Buck, Miller, and Caul, 1974) emotional states. Females are more likely to claim "love" for same-sex friends (Rubin, 1970), and display more positive feelings about social interaction than males (Ickes and Barnes, 1977). In a managerial context, females have been seen as more open to subordinates' suggestions than males, more encouraging of effort, more concerned and attentive, and more likely to emphasize happy interpersonal relationships (Baird and Bradley, 1979). This pattern of communication attitude and style differences leads this writer to infer that there might indeed be differences between the sexes in the realm of peak communication experiencing. That possibility will be considered in this inquiry.

METHOD

PCE Instrument

The first task was to develop an efficient questionnaire for the gathering of data on peak communication experiences (PCEs). The writer returned to Maslow's (1968) original model of the nineteen characteristics of the generalized peak experience, and translated each of Maslow's characteristics into a direct first-person statement having meaning within an interpersonal communication context. For example, Maslow's statement that in the generalized peak experience "B-cognizing seems to make the perception richer" became, "I saw the other person, and our communication together, in a richer way, a newer way, a more exciting way." Another example of such a translation is Maslow's statement

that "Perception in the peak moment tends strongly to be idiographic and non-classificatory", which became, "It's as though I compared this person with no other person--as we talked this person became more and more special, and not interchangeable with anyone else." Expert judges were used to provide feedback so that these translations did not substantially depart from Maslow's original meanings, as determined contextually. These nineteen communication-specific translations, generated from Maslow's model of the generalized peak experience, together with a brief introduction, constituted the PCE inventory used here.

Procedure

Eighty-six college undergraduates (58% females, 42% males), enrolled in a required course in "principles of speech communication" at a major southwestern university in 1982, were the subjects of this study. The majority of these respondents were majoring in either business or engineering.

At the second class meeting of the semester students were assigned a brief paper (to be collected during the third class session) in which they were to identify their relationships with the three people in their lives with whom they had most been able to communicate, along with a description of the features of this high-quality communication. This assignment set the tone for the present study. At the beginning of the third class session, after these papers were collected, respondents were given the PCE instrument and asked to read the following introduction (underlines included):

> Will you think of the greatest moments in communication that you have ever had in your entire life? The peak moments in communication--the times when you felt that you and another person most got on one another's wavelength, when you most fully got through to the other, and the other got through to you. These times were probably within the upper 5-10% of all your communication experiences in your life--the most positive communication encounters you've ever had, of the highest happiness and fulfillment.
>
> Will you check each of the following items that in fact applies to these rare peak communication experiences. Maybe none of these items will apply, maybe some will, maybe all will--please be as accurate as you can in your responses.

Respondents then read each of the nineteen PCE items, and used a five-point scale to indicate whether for them a given item was very true or moderately true, or whether it did not apply, or was to some extent untrue. This procedure took an average of approximately ten minutes. The results to be reported are based on a nominal treatment (true/untrue) of these PCE data, to maximize practical interpretation.

Statistical Analysis

Due to the fact that gender seems to be an influential variable in communicaton contexts, the percentages of females and males responding affirmatively to each of the nineteen PCE items were compared using "normal tests" of the differences between proportions for independent groups. One-tailed tests of significance were used, since the literature indicates that whenever socio-emotional differences are obtained between the sexes, they consistently result in females scoring higher than males (Eakins & Eakins, 1978).

RESULTS

Peak Communication Experiencing

On eighteen out of the nineteen PCE items, 50% or more of the female respondents indicated that the item did in fact apply to their moments of highest communication happiness and fulfillment. For males, 50% or more answered affirmatively to fifteen of the nineteen PCE items. Two-thirds or more of both sexes answered affirmatively to ten of the nineteen items (see starred items in Table 1). These ten PCE items would seem especially descriptive of peak communication experiences for this sample of respondents.

[Table 1 goes here]

The first finding, then, is that the characteristics of the generalized peak experience identified by Maslow seem also to be applicable as descriptors of peak communication experiencing. The respondents selected the Maslow characteristics in rather sizable proportions as articulating aspects of their own greatest moments of interpersonal communication.

Out of the nineteen PCE items, four items (Table 1, items #2, 3, 10, and 16) were used by over 75% of both female and male respondents, as follows: "I was completely absorbed in the other person I was communicating with, and in what we were talking about--my total attention was present"; "I saw the beauty of the person I was communicating with, and the beauty of our communication itself, just as it was"; "My listening seemed so open, so receptive, and the words just flowed in upon me without me

grabbing or straining to understand"; and, "It's as though I compared this person with no other person--as we talked this person became more and more special, and not interchangeable with anyone else."

There were only three PCE items (#5, 13, 14) used by 50% or less of both females and males in representing peak communication experiences: "I forgot about myself during our communication; at times it was as if my own sense of 'self' had sort of disappeared"; "I saw and heard without my own categories and labels and judgments getting in the way like they usually do"; and, "Things that normally would seem like opposites, or somehow contradictory, became resolved while we were communicating, or at least didn't seem as opposite as they usually would."

When we compare the four most highly used PCE items (over 75% of respondents) with the three least used items (50% or less of respondents), all of the differences between these two groups of items are statistically significant, for both females and males (smallest difference for females, $Z=4.24$, $p < .001$; and for males, $Z=4.38$, $p < .001$). In sum, the four most frequently identified characteristics were used by a significantly greater proportion of respondents than the three least frequently identified characteristics. Reflection on the interpretation of this finding will be offered in the discussion section.

Gender Differences

On seven of the nineteen PCE items there were significant differences between the sexes, with females in the greater

proportion by a mean average of twenty-one percentage points (see Table 1). A larger percentage of females than males portrayed their PCEs as involving these elements: seeing the other in a richer way; a feeling that it was almost more than one could bear; a resolution of opposites; acceptance and love; a falling away of fears, anxieties, inhibitions, defenses; spontaneity and effortlessness; playfulness and creativity. Gender may be said to exert an influence in respondents' descriptions of their peak communication experiencing.

DISCUSSION

It would appear, first of all, that the concept of "peak communicaton experiencing" did indeed have meaning for the respondents. They were seemingly able to recall facets of their PCEs via the PCE form derived from Maslow's prototypical model of the peak experience. These data remind us that special acts of human communication can operate as energetic agents in activating transcendant modes of feeling and behaving. There is much to ruminate upon in Table 1 for the student of human communication.

The only four items in Table 1 used by over 75% of both females and males (#2, 3, 10, 16) appear, upon inspection, to be related to Rogers' concepts of <u>empathy</u> and <u>unconditional positive regard</u> (Rogers, 1980). Specifically, item #2, dealing with "absorption" and the communicator's "total attention" being present, and item #10, concerning the communicator's "open" and "receptive" style of listening, seem to touch upon the notion of

empathy. And item #3, seeing the "beauty" of the other and the communication itself, "just as it was," seems to bear on unconditional positive regard, as does item #15, in which the other communicator is recognized as being "special." It may be that during our peak communication experiences we tend to become naturally therapeutic communicators.

The three characteristics with which the respondents least identified (#5, 13, 14) appear to share a common denominator: all involve a letting go of something, a relative abandonment of an habitual mode of operation. The three disengagements that respondents were not likely to attain have to do with a "forgetting" or "disappearance" of the self, a dropping of labels and judgments, and a moving away from a two-valued, dualistic mindset. Of course each of these processes demands the surrender of longstanding cognitive styles.

One can perhaps speculate as to a gate-model of PCEs: it may be that the characteristics of PCEs can be said to be arranged along a continuum, and certain of the PCE facets are experienced only by those who have progressed far along the continuum. The falling away of a firm sense of self, of labels and judgments, and of logical opposites may be reserved for advanced PCE progressions. Fewer proceed through the final doors, closer and closer to a no-boundary awareness, an actual state of unity consciousness (Wilber, 1979). Nevertheless, the fact remains that the majority of the respondents (business and engineering students) in the present study do report having entered through

certain doors of expanded consciousness via significant episodes of communication with fellow human beings.

The obtained PCE sex differences are consistent with previous findings of communication research. The psychology of sex differences recognizes that males have traditionally specialized in such skills as "competing," "defending," and "controlling," while females have developed themselves more in the area of "communion," involving the ability to be intimate and feelingful with themselves and others (e.g., Eakins and Eakins, 1978). It is not surprising to see this difference in specialization reflected in differences in descriptions of peak communication experiencing. Maslow (1964, p. 29) speculated that males and females might not come by their peak experiences in exactly the same ways. The findings of this study might be an instance of this possibility, suggesting that females are perhaps relatively more fully receptive and responsive to peak communication experiencing than are males, as a group. This need not obscure the simultaneous recognition, however, that males also have peak communication experiences.

The present study is obviously a rather crude foray into the realm of peak communication experiencing, but it is a beginning. The author's own pursuits into this territory will next involve examining the factorial structure of peak communication experiencing, and then the situational pre-conditions of these greatest moments in interpersonal communication. The routes for research in this realm go in many directions, a rich array of choices

awaiting the curious adventurer. The further illumination of peak communication experiencing is eminently worthwhile, with no less involved than the understanding and promotion of interpersonal harmony.

Table 1

Peak Communication Experiences

	PCE DESCRIPTORS (Derived from the generalized Maslow model)	AFFIRMATIVE RESPONSES (Total Subject N=86) Females	Males	Differences[a]
*	1. Our communication felt incredibly significant, as if it were somehow all there was in the universe.	68%	75%	
*	2. I was completely absorbed in the other person I was communicating with, and in what we were talking about--my total attention was present.	92%	94%	
*	3. I saw the beauty of the person I was communicating with, and the beauty of our communication itself, just as it was.	90%	78%	
*	4. I saw the other person, and our communication together, in a richer way, a newer way, a more exciting way.	90%	67%	$Z=2.65$, $p<.01$
	5. I forgot about myself during our communication; at times it was as if my own sense of "self" had sort of disappeared.	50%	42%	
*	6. Our communication was valuable in and of itself, regardless of what it would lead to--it was enough, just the way it was, as an end in itself.	68%	67%	
*	7. I would lose track of the passage of time, and of our physical surroundings.	68%	69%	

Table 1 (continued)

Peak Communication Experiences

PCE DESCRIPTORS (Derived from the generalized Maslow model)	AFFIRMATIVE RESPONSES (Total Subject N=86) Females	Males	Differences[a]
8. The communication with this person moved me to awe, wonder, humility, reverence--there was something almost sacred about our act of communication.	60%	58%	
9. During our communication I gained insight into a truer level of truth than I usually see; my eyes were opened in a fresh way.	72%	61%	
* 10. My listening seemed so open, so receptive, and the words just flowed in upon me without me grabbing or straining to understand.	80%	78%	
11. The experience of becoming so close to this other person through our communication almost had a touch of "pleasant fear," a feeling of it all being more than I could bear, a feeling that it was almost "too wonderful."	54%	36%	Z=1.65, p<.05
12. Everything somehow became more One--and I became more One with it all, through our communication.	54%	51%	
13. I saw and heard without my own categories & labels & judgments getting in the way like they usually do.	48%	31%	Z=1.58, .10>p>.05

Table 1 (continued)

Peak Communication Experiences

PCE DESCRIPTORS (Derived from the generalized Maslow model)	AFFIRMATIVE RESPONSES (Total Subject N=86) Females	Males	Differences[a]
14. Things that normally would seem like opposites, or somehow contradictory, became resolved while we were communicating, or at least didn't seem the opposite as they usually would.	50%	31%	Z=1.76, p<.05
* 15. I felt very accepting and loving of the other person during our communication.	94%	69%	Z=3.08, p<.01
* 16. It's as though I compared this person with no other person--as we talked this person became more & more special, and not interchangeable with anyone else.	90%	89%	
17. During our communication my fears, anxiety, inhibitions and defenses all fell away.	72%	54%	Z=1.72, p<.05
* 18. I became more spontaneous, effortless, more myself, more whole in my communication.	88%	69%	Z=1.74, p<.05
19. I began to feel more childlike, in a healthy kind of way, in my communication--more freely playful, expressive, creative.	76%	53%	Z=2.23, p<.05

* asterisks indicating those items responded to affirmatively by over two-thirds of both female and male respondents.

(a) all tests of significance are one-tailed.

FOOTNOTES

1. This claim is made after a literature review of such journals as Human Communication Research, Journal of Communication, Communication Monographs, Communication Quarterly, Quarterly Journal of Speech, and Communication Education. For an overview of general peak experience research see Mathes, W., Zevon, M., Roter., P., and Joerger, S., "Peak Experience Tendencies: Scale Development and Theory Testing," Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 1982, 22, 92-108.

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